STATE OF COOPERATIVE FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS
FUELING INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE GROWTH

International Symposium on Cooperative Financial Institutions

"Fueling Inclusive and Equitable Growth"

28-29 May 2026 | United Nations HQ, New York City, USA

Information Note

Cooperative Financial Institutions (CFIs), including cooperative banks, credit unions, and mutual financial organizations, represent one of the most established, resilient, and socially grounded pillars of the global financial system. Rooted in democratic ownership and member participation, they have, for generations, practiced a form of finance that places human needs, productive investment, and long-term stability at its core. In doing so, they have provided financial services to populations and sectors frequently underserved by conventional financial systems, including micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, agricultural producers, women and youth entrepreneurs, and communities in Least Developed Countries, Small Island Developing States, and other vulnerable contexts. The international community has recently reaffirmed the urgency of building financial systems that are inclusive, equitable, locally anchored, and capable of supporting sustainable development. The Sevilla Commitment adopted at the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development and the Doha Political Declaration of the World Social Summit 2025 together recognize that achieving global development objectives requires not only greater financial resources but also financial models that are structurally aligned with social inclusion and sustainable development. The commemoration of 2025 as the second UN International Year of Cooperatives was a warm coincidence.

The main objective of the Symposium is to initiate a structured process to position Cooperative Financial Institutions as key actors in the implementation of these global commitments, particularly in the lead-up to the UN International Year of Cooperatives in 2035.

The ICA Global Strategy 2026–2030 has provided a forward-looking framework for strengthening and scaling the contribution of cooperatives to global development. Central to this strategy is the recognition that cooperatives must continue to ***practice*** their internationally recognized values & principles, ***promote*** the cooperative model as an essential pillar of the global economic architecture, and ***protect*** the cooperative identity that ensure their distinctiveness, legitimacy, and effectiveness. Cooperative Financial Institutions occupy a uniquely strategic position within this framework, serving not only as financial intermediaries but also as enablers of broader cooperative development across sectors.

Building on the successful collaboration between ICBA and ICA in 2022 marking the centennial of ICBA, this Symposium represents a critical moment to bring cooperative finance more centrally into global discussions on development financing at the United Nations. It also forms part of a broader trajectory toward strengthening cooperative finance as a cornerstone of the cooperative movement's contribution to the global development agenda.

The Symposium will also contribute to protecting the cooperative identity and institutional integrity of CFIs. As CFIs grow and evolve within increasingly complex financial and regulatory environments, ensuring that regulatory frameworks recognize their distinct governance structures, member ownership, and social purpose is essential. The Symposium will examine how enabling regulatory and policy environments can be strengthened to allow CFIs to grow and innovate while preserving the democratic governance, autonomy, and community orientation that define their cooperative nature.

Thematic Dimensions

The Symposium will explore three interconnected thematic dimensions that reflect both the priorities of the ICA Strategy and the operational realities of cooperative finance.

Competitiveness an Access to Capital	Investment, Intersectorality and Impact
This dimension will examine the business foundations that enable CFIs to remain competitive, resilient, and scalable in evolving financial markets. It will explore how CFIs leverage their cooperative model to mobilize member capital, retain earnings, and access external financing while preserving their identity and governance. Issues included: innovative coop-capital instruments, investment mechanisms, and partnerships that strengthen their capacity to finance productive sectors and community development.	*Cooperative financial institutions play a critical role in mobilizing domestic resources and channeling them into productive sectors, including small enterprises, agricultural development, housing, and community infrastructure. This dimension will explore how cooperative finance can contribute more effectively to investment vehicles, social and green finance instruments, and partnerships with development finance institutions.*
Governance, Regulatory Environment and People Centredness	
This dimension focuses on strengthening the Cooperative-Identity, governance, and institutional capacity of Cooperative Financial Institutions as foundations of their legitimacy, resilience, and sustainable growth. Rooted in democratic member control and concern for community, CFIs must ensure governance systems that uphold accountability, professionalism, and intergenerational continuity while adapting to evolving economic and technological conditions. The Symposium will examine regulatory, human capital, and technological enablers—including digital transformation and leadership development, to enhance outreach, efficiency, and innovation. Emphasis will be placed on youth engagement and intergenerational knowledge transfer to secure the long-term relevance and effectiveness of cooperative finance.	

Expected Outcomes and Forward Path

The Symposium is intended to produce concrete outcomes that contribute to strengthening cooperative finance as a pillar of inclusive and equitable development. It will articulate a Cooperative Finance Response Framework that will aim at positioning cooperative financial institutions as implementers of global development commitments and contributors to the broader strategic objectives of the cooperative movement.

An outcome will be the development of a forward-looking action agenda to strengthen enabling regulatory and policy environments for cooperative financial institutions. This will recognize that regulatory frameworks designed for investor-owned financial institutions often fail to adequately account for the cooperative identity, governance, and operational characteristics of CFIs. By identifying pathways toward proportionate and enabling regulation, the Symposium will contribute to protecting the cooperative nature of CFIs while enabling their sustainable growth.

The Symposium will also contribute to strengthening the capacity of cooperative financial institutions to practice effective, innovative, and impactful finance. It will advance discussions on cooperative investment vehicles, blended finance mechanisms, digital transformation, governance strengthening, and data systems that enhance institutional effectiveness and impact measurement. These efforts will help ensure that cooperative financial institutions are equipped to meet evolving development challenges while remaining grounded in cooperative principles.

Continuity and Contribution to the Wider Cooperative Movement

The Symposium is conceived as part of a continuous strategic trajectory rather than a standalone event. Its conclusions will feed directly into the ICA General Assembly in Panama in September 2026 and contribute to broader cooperative discussions on enabling environments, cooperative finance, and cooperative development. In doing so, it will help establish a clear and coherent pathway connecting the ICBA Symposium in New York to subsequent global cooperative processes and milestones, including the roadmap toward the 2035 International Year of Cooperatives.

Through this process, the Symposium will contribute to the implementation of the ICA Strategy 2026–2030 by strengthening the ability of cooperative financial institutions to practice inclusive and democratic finance, promote the cooperative model as a recognized and essential component of the global financial architecture, and protect the cooperative identity and enabling conditions necessary for their continued growth and effectiveness.

Participants and Porgramme

Over approximately one and a half days, the Symposium will bring together leaders of cooperative financial institutions and cooperative investment organizations, representatives of governments and regulatory authorities, United Nations entities, development finance institutions, cooperative federations, researchers, and youth cooperators.

Component	Focus
Opening Session	High-level remarks and keynote addresses positioning Cooperative Financial Institutions within global development commitments and the roadmap toward the UN International Year of Cooperatives 2035.
Practice: Competitiveness, Capital, and Development Impact	Examination of the business case of CFIs, including access to capital, cooperative investment mechanisms, financial sustainability, and their role in financing productive sectors and supporting inclusive growth.
Protect: Governance, Identity, and Enabling Regulatory Frameworks	Dialogue on strengthening cooperative governance, leadership, and institutional capacity, and advancing proportionate regulatory and policy environments that safeguard cooperative identity while enabling innovation and growth.
Promote: Innovation, Outreach, and Global Positioning	Exploration of digital transformation, financial inclusion, youth engagement, and strategies to enhance the visibility and strategic positioning of cooperative finance within global financial systems.
Forward Path toward 2035	Strategic reflections and adoption of a Cooperative Finance Response Framework contributing to global cooperative processes and strengthening CFIs' role in implementing international development commitments.